

THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND EVENTS OF CHILDHOOD

high-pressure ego development. The sense of importance and worthiness is continually hammered into the children's minds through comparing them with either their sibling or other children.¹ It is no exaggeration to say that competitiveness in Silwa receives its first stimulus from sibling relationships, and is expressed in the popular saying that 'children who come on top of one another cannot get along with each other'. Siblings of different ages are expected to play in different age groups, especially after the age of six or seven. Although there is no institutionalized favouritism for the first son with regard to inheritance, for example, he is usually the most welcome member of the family as in his later life he will be his father's representative. It is no accident, then, that the first-born son receives more attention, as is usually expressed in his ceremonies of naming, circumcision, and wedding. 865 893 [867] 857 858

Together with this sibling relationship envisaged in a series of children chasing each other, one can hardly fail to note the difference of treatment between boys and girls in general. These disparities between the treatment of the two sexes are not mainly based on the superiority of the male sex or the female, but are largely founded on the relevance of the two sexes to the perpetuation of the family name and their respective economic activities.² The popular saying goes to the effect that the daughter's son should not receive much attention from his grandfather as such attention is wasted. However, it does not unduly worry parents in any way if their daughters do not show behaviour indications of rivalry during childhood. It will become clearer, as we proceed, that girls only enjoy relative indulgence during infancy, especially with regard to their comparatively longer period of suckling. But from childhood onwards they are expected to approach sociological adulthood more quickly than the boys.³ [865]

The second characteristic of the period of childhood is connected with the decreasing amount of care and attention given to the child by its mother. This is evidenced by the children's appearance during this stage of development. They are less clean in body and clothes, and it is not an unusual sight to find nasal mucus on children's faces. Mothers justify this neglect on the grounds that the child at this stage, where he is usually out with other children and thus exposed to the public, should not appear attractive for fear of the evil eye. This lack of interest in children's appearance usually continues until the age of nine, ten or eleven. Thereafter an unkempt or shabby child would be a disgrace to his parents. The renewed interest, especially in the child's clothes, after the age of ten, is related also to the need for covering the organs of reproduction by wearing 855 [1954] [897] [882]

¹ For concrete statements of children concerning sibling rivalry, see Appendix VIII, 'Stewart Emotional Response Test', and Appendix X, 'Story Completion Test'.

² See Chapter I.

³ It is assumed here that rivalry is socially inherited and is passed on from parents to their children. 'A mother through her attitude continues the old battle, and in the competitive struggles of her children she relives the competitive struggles of her childhood.' R. H. Hilgard, 'Sibling Rivalry and Social Heredity', in *Psychiatry*, Vol. 14, 1951. 865

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855 be explained as a result of the cultural pressure for a large family, the
854 achievement of which is threatened by the high death rate among children.

Parents feel that they have done their duty towards the child's care immediately he is able to walk and talk, and the rest of his development is left to God's protection. Moreover, the relatively low mortality rate amongst sucklings in Silwa is due to the fact that they depend mainly upon their mother's milk, while after weaning, adult food is given to the children which cannot be an adequate substitute for the mother's milk because of its unsuitability and deficiency. Yet it must be noted here that [146] children in the province of Aswan are very much undernourished compared with the normal healthy development of other more fortunate children. They are ten centimetres (about 4 inches) less in height, and five kilograms (about 12 pounds) less in weight, and the percentage of haemoglobin in their blood is only 40 per cent.¹ 145

857 A third important characteristic of this period of childhood is the integration of the boy or the girl with the play group and age mates. About the age of three, the child's attachment to his mother is expected to be over,

• [866] and this means gradually increasing its contacts with its age group outside the household, and thus the child directs itself, first to its elder siblings and relatives, and then gradually to other children in its play activities. The child may be led by hand or straddled on the shoulder by an older sister to watch other children playing, or taken to defaecate where other children do the same thing. The authority of the older sibling plays a dominant part in shaping the child's attitudes from now onwards. The older sisters or brothers act as guardians for their younger siblings; they soothe them when they cry, protect them from interference from other boys or girls. 857 593 While older boys are playing, one might hear one of them saying: 'Your brother is crying, and I'll have nothing to do with him, you are his brother and you should quieten him.' It is accepted that if the older brothers and sisters are about, other boys and girls hardly ever interfere with the younger siblings for fear of being blamed for their crying or injury. It must be pointed out here that boys are usually less burdened with the care of their younger brothers compared with girls, and this is probably one of the reasons that gives the boys freer scope for movement and rough play.

The younger boys and girls form the fringe of their older siblings' play-groups, but gradually they start to form their own groups, and imitate their elders. One finds that younger boys of five or six might be playing with their older brothers in one game, but one hardly finds boys of eight or nine in the same play group as their older brothers of the age of twelve, thirteen or fourteen. On the whole, siblings after the age of seven or eight usually prefer to go to different places for their games, and till that age, the basis of play is blood relationship and neighbourhood. A stranger boy who wants to join other children in their play is either introduced to the

¹ Ministry of Health Statistics quoted by M. Khattab, in a speech in the Upper House of Parliament, in *Al-Ahram* (Egyptian daily paper), 26 December 1940.

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 Besides learning from their parents and elders, children also learn through their association with slightly older boys and girls (by three or four years but certainly not more than five or six years) who usually assume the role of leadership or teachers in work or play. As in Tale society, every pupil becomes, in some situation, a teacher for others.

[55] It must be noted, however, that the behaviour pattern and motivation in the learning situation where adults are involved are different from those of the age-group learning situation. In the former, subservience, respect, and fear are expected, while in the latter rivalry and reciprocity on equal terms are the norms. If the child does not come up to adult expectation, it is because 'it deliberately twists its neck which should be straightened by a slap'. Discipline and compulsion are the means for enforcing conformity and 'adab' on children by their elders. On the other hand, amongst the age groups, mocking, ridiculing, and scoffing at those who do not reach the expected level of maturity are the pressures exerted by their peers. In this connection, nicknames are frequently used by children to single out the ones who are laggards in their social maturity, partly a continuation of the sibling rivalry pattern of motivation.

[82] The two following examples indicate some of the ways in which boys deal with each other. A boy of fifteen who did not appear weak found it rather difficult for some time to fill the panniers of his camel with fertilizer, and other boys had to help him. Failing to perform the task expected from boys of his age, his fellows decided to put a girl's headcloth round his head-cap, by taking off his turban. Then he was tied to the panniers and the other boys led the half-laden camel to the field. This method, occasionally resorted to by such boys, is supposed to awaken the sense of shame in those who are not sufficiently keen on doing what is expected of them. The other example is that of a fight of a boy of about ten years old with other boys because he 'broke wind' while they were playing. When asked, he denied the fact, and they went on smelling each other. When they discovered that he was the culprit, they started building him a grave in which they buried a stone as a symbol for the boy, shouting 'the farther is here, the farther is here'. They also bewailed him as adults would bewail a deceased person, by saying, 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet'. Indeed, lack of control and modesty after the age of ten can be a source of ridicule for children about this age.

857 Moreover, if restraint and docility are the keynotes of child behaviour towards adults, a free and impulsive life reigns amongst children themselves. Their own problems must be kept to themselves and not communicated whenever possible to their adults, who are not expected to enquire about children's activities. For children, it is gossip that a child would go and tell his parents what other boys and girls have been saying or doing. If two boys or more start quarrelling with each other, they should fight the issue out for themselves. The laying of complaints by children before [86] their elders about quarrels with other children is greatly discouraged, and when complaints are taken up by fussy parents, they might keep the whole

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neighbourhood wrangling for some time. In this case, boys who have been sneaking are referred to by other boys as 'women', or in the case of girls are branded as 'loose' or 'prostitutes'. Parents' advice to their children is, 'Hit back him who hits you'.

Thus, before adolescence, a boy, not only through overhearing the gossip of his elders, but also through his age group norms, becomes aware of the significance of gossip as a means of social control. He is perhaps the cause of gossip or included in it, and this would expose him to shaming or avoidance by other children. The boy's friends might not speak to him and this would make him stand exposed and isolated.

Thus, it is obvious that though any signs of children's aggression towards adults is tabooed and punishable, their expression of hostility towards their age-mates is given full play. Rivalry and competition are mainly directed both in the adult and in the child world towards equals. Rivalry between generations seldom occurs, as it is mainly horizontal and not vertical.

The cultural axiom is for the adult to give and for the young to receive: to accept aid in kind or money from one's elders is permissible, while the reverse would be humiliating, or at least embarrassing, unless prescribed by kinship obligations, such as aid rendered by the son to his father in old age.

There is a vivid contrast between the lively, free, and rough behaviour of children in their groups and their shy and diffident manners when they are attending grown-ups, while eating or during any celebration in the house. On being punished or rebuked by his elders, the child is expected to obey, while if he shows any submissiveness, if wronged by his 'pals', he would be punished by his parents and would be asked to retaliate for himself. A boy was called Abdu the Batil (the coward) by his pals, a name for which he seemed to have no outward resentment. On asking the boy about how he got this nickname, he told me that his father had applied the name to him and told the other boys with whom he associated to call him so, as his father was annoyed by his constant appeals to his parents to protect him from other children.

After reviewing the general atmosphere of the two educative spheres in the child's life, it is appropriate to discuss the means by which some social norms are impressed on him. As mentioned earlier, one of the cardinal virtues of a disciplined child is his respect for his elders. Till the age of four or five, this respect expresses itself in the young boy, on being introduced to a gathering in the house, touching the older person's hands with his lips and forehead. When the child grows older, this is replaced by a handshake followed immediately by his withdrawal from the adult gathering. The sign of respect by kissing the older person's hand with one's lips and forehead, although it ceases to apply amongst village people themselves, would still be practised by older boys and adults towards strangers visiting the house. Moreover, this is always the sign of respect for